

Low-Birth-Weight Babies

The goal for Tennessee as well as the nation for the year 2000 was to reduce the number of low-birth-weight babies to no more than 7.1 percent. Neither reached that goal. Low-birth weight is the term used to define infants who are born too small. The national standard defines low-birth weight as infants weighing less than 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds) and very low birth weight as 1,500 grams (3.5 pounds).

In Tennessee in 1998, 4,483 low-birth-weight babies were born to white mothers and 2,416 low-birth-weight babies were born to African-American mothers. As shown on the graph, this translates to 7.6 percent white and 14.3 percent African-American low-birth-weight babies in 1998. Although not substantial, these numbers have risen since 1997 for both white and African-American babies. Nationally, African-American babies are twice as likely as white infants to be born low-birth weight, to be born pre-term, and to die at birth (Shiono, Behrman, 1995).

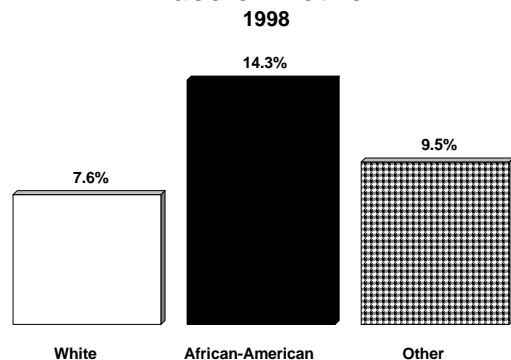
In 1997, 8.8 percent of Tennessee's babies were low-birth-weight, as compared to the national average of 7.5 percent. With a rate almost 15 percent higher than the national average, Tennessee ranked worse than 40 other states (KIDS COUNT, 2000).

Low-birth-weight babies are not a homogeneous group. They have a multiple range of growth, health, and developmental outcomes. These problems intensify at birth as the babies' weight decreases. A baby's weight at birth greatly affects his or her future behavioral, neuro-sensory, development, and health issues well into adulthood. Some of the less severe but more common developmental and physical delays reflect the fact that low-birth-weight children are disproportionately more likely to come from disadvantaged environments (Shiono, Behrman, 1995).

What Works

- 1) Provide smoking cessation programs that are designed for pregnant females.
- 2) Provide universal and comprehensive care to all pregnant females.
- 3) Support and expand research to focus on ethnic differences.
- 4) Support and expand programs to assist children and families to reverse the possibility of low-birth-weight and potential birth defects.

Percent of Low-Birth-Weight Babies by Race of Mother



Source: Tennessee Department of Health

To prevent low-weight births it is necessary to understand what the causes are in order to determine modifiable factors that are highly related to these causes. Low-birth weight that results from sub-optimal intrauterine growth is associated with three major risk factors: cigarette smoking during pregnancy, low maternal weight gain, and low pregnancy weight. These three risk factors account for nearly two-thirds of all growth-retarded infants (Kramer, 1987). Other factors that affect low-birth weight are the age of the mother, economic status, stress, ethnicity, and experience of violence during pregnancy.